



STEP INTO LIQUID

Air Traffic
Fractured Life
Astralwerks

Marrying the crispness of British New Wave to the force and melodicism of Britpop, *Fractured Life*, the tour de force debut from Wessex youngsters Air Traffic arrives on these shores as perhaps one of the most assured first albums by a band since *Definitely Maybe*, The Black Crowes' *Shake Your Money Maker* or The Thrills' *So Much for the City*. Throughout the album, lead singer and songwriter Chris Wall's vocals are remarkable; perhaps one of the most singular vocal performances since Jeff Buckley's vocals on *Grace*, Liam Gallagher's on *Definitely Maybe* or Conor Deasy's on *So Much for the City*. Wall's singing is a revelation, and we may well remember 2008 as the year we first heard his soaring, urgent voice.

One of the great new bands of what might one day be defined as the post-Radiohead era, Air Traffic crafts the kind of smart, muscular anthems that evoke Blur, Jeff Buckley, Coldplay, Oasis, Radiohead, the Stereophonics and U2, while reaching back to the glam guitars and drums of *The Rise and Fall of Ziggy Stardust and the Spiders From Mars* and a smattering of Smiths songs, including "Panic," "Sheila Take a Bow" and "I Started Something I Couldn't Finish." Wall is quite young (his gap year after high school, which he spent surfing in Queensland, Australia, was in 2005), and his songs are steeped in the music of the Nineties. Drummer David Jordan and guitarist Tom Pritchard first noticed Wall at a 2003 school concert in Bournemouth, where Wall performed a solo rendition of Radiohead's "Go to Sleep." Current bassist Jim Maddock joined Air Traffic after Wall returned from Australia and prior to the recording of *Fractured Life*.

Air Traffic recorded *Fractured Life* at Rockfield Studios in Wales, where such booming, echoey masterpieces as *Definitely Maybe* and *(What's the Story) Morning Glory* (and much of Queen's "Bohemian Rhapsody") were recorded. The sound of the entire album is enormous, big piano leads entwined with effects-driven guitar lines that propel soaring, shout-along choruses that smack like cold ocean waves. These are narratives of youth, bowed by love and other sorrows, yet still triumphant, performed by a band of boys whose age belies their impeccable musicianship.

Almost every song on *Fractured Life* feels like an epic. Album opener "Just Abuse Me" begins with Wall singing over piano, then breaks into a pounding full band performance



that sacrifices none of Wall's melody: "I'll let you use me, and just abuse me, but girl I want you to be mine." "Charlotte" combines the angularity of Franz Ferdinand with the bashing melodicism of Material Issue, while piano ballad "Empty Space" is similar to Lennon's "Jealous Guy" until the song's operatic finale, when it becomes more aria than pop song, Wall singing his angels up from the sea.

"I Like That" is powered by stomping drums and a restrained guitar squall, with atmospheric boogie woogie piano and a nonsensical refrain of "la-dam-ba-ba-ba-dam..." sung to the tune of the Kinks' "Sunny Afternoon" at the break. "Never Even Told Me Her Name" is simple New Wave ecstasy suffused with a reference to "Suffragette City," while "Get in Line" sounds like the Smiths' "Girl Afraid" rewritten by Weezer. The song features a percussive guitar lead during the verses, and it's here you realize that Pritchard, often playing in Wall's shadow, is a stunning guitarist and Air Traffic's secret weapon, the co-architect of songs that move liquidly from crescendo to crescendo.

The album's final two songs (excluding the hidden track), "I Can't Understand" and "Your Fractured Life," are elegiac beauties. "Fractured Life" ends with the refrain of "please don't let me down" repeated again and again, much like the refrain of "how long, to sing this song" at the end of U2's "Forty." It's the most anthemic track on an album with a surfeit of anthems. The song features an especially plangent, hopeful vocal from Wall: "you've got the strength within, don't give up there's so much more to see, so many things beyond your wildest dreams...the world is at your feet."

In *The Bushwhacked Piano*, his first novel, Thomas McGuane writes, "a famous man says that we go through life with a diminishing portfolio of enthusiasms: and these, these these *children*, these these these these *little children*, will soon not be able to feel this way about anything again."

And so, to the gentlemen of Air Traffic – here's hoping they can keep it rolling.